

Joseph Okello

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Fragile families, mob justice and resilience in northern Uganda

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When a justice system is so corrupt it offers no protection to communities, it has been argued the lynching of accused criminals is an effective resilience strategy. But do such notions of resilience obscure the need for better justice and security structures? The moving story of a local family illustrates the real-world circumstances behind the concepts.

This post is part of the series [Deconstructing Notions of Resilience](#) based on the project at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa.

Stephen

One night in late 2018 we caught a boy of about 14 trying to break into Julian's car. He is a neighbour called Stephen*, so we sent him home and told him to come back the next day. Talking to him then, a sad story emerged. He had been born with HIV and his parents are both deceased. He lived with his older half-brother, Komakech, and his wife, Jennifer, and their children. Jennifer was away at the time of the theft and there was no food in the house. Stephen had dropped out of school two years before when his mother died and money for fees dried up. Unsurprisingly, he seemed unhealthy and depressed. We called Komakech for a meeting and we agreed that Stephen would move to the home of his uncle in the hope that he would receive better care.

A year later in November 2019 Stephen turned up again, looking much better, and back living with Komakech and Jennifer. He asked that we give him some work so that he could earn money to contribute to the family celebrations and buy new clothes for Christmas. We agreed he could help in the compound for two or three weeks in December and all seemed to be going well, but early one morning, ten days later, we heard that he and another boy had been caught stealing a goat. They were in the hands of a mob so we raced to the scene to find that they had already been rescued by the Chairman of our Division. (In Gulu, where we live in northern Uganda, there are four divisions.)

The Chairman later told Joseph he had only intervened because the boys were children – he would not have bothered for adults. He handed the boys over to the police who, because of his political seniority, charged them and took them to the juvenile prison. Anyone with less authority would probably have been ignored by the police, who would have followed their typical practice and released the boys back to the mob. We should add that the 'mob' in this case are also our neighbours, largely decent people but poor, victims of rampant theft and in some cases willing to take justice into their own hands in the absence of

alternatives: our justice, law and order system is comprehensively corrupt and dysfunctional.

Jennifer

Early in January 2020, while Stephen was still in custody awaiting trial, we were contacted by Jennifer. Komakech's younger brother Francis (Stephen's older half-brother) had that morning murdered his wife and their infant child at their home some kilometres away. Francis had then come to Jennifer's home (Komakech was out), and without telling her what had happened gave her what was left of his money. He then took poison and died in a nearby compound belonging to a stranger. The motives and emotions behind this appalling tragedy remain completely obscure to those who knew them.

On hearing the news Komakech had immediately taken all their family property and gone into hiding: the relatives of Francis's wife would be seeking revenge. They would feel entitled to take any property belonging to the murderer's relatives, including Komakech and Jennifer. They were likely to kill Komakech if they caught him, while Jennifer was also at some risk, even though she was only related by marriage; in fact the victim, Lucy, had been her best friend – they had married brothers.

As well as this, the woman in whose compound Francis had died had gone to the village chairman, known as the LC 1, demanding that her place be spiritually cleansed – suicide is very problematic on many levels in Acholi culture.

Jennifer, who was eight months pregnant, had come to us seeking help to escape by going to some relatives about 30km away, and we had given her money for transport. But before she could leave she was arrested by the LC 1 and his colleagues, who demanded that she pay for the cleansing of the suicide site – the price to sacrifice a goat. They had tried to confiscate her household possessions to pay for this but

found they had all been taken by Komakech and were threatening to torture her to reveal his location. In a somewhat discordant meeting we tried to get the LC 1 to back off with threats of law. This didn't work, so we ended up paying for the goat.

Jennifer's situation is now looking better: Komakech is still in hiding, and she remains anxious about leaving the house, but the threat has faded somewhat and she has a new baby girl. The charges against Stephen were dropped and on his release he started an apprenticeship in a motorbike repair workshop, but this was suspended in mid-March due to the coronavirus lockdown. We have heard that he is no longer staying at Jennifer's place and is suspected of several recent thefts.

The family

Talking to them about what happened, an extraordinary family history emerged: Komakech's father and aunt committed suicide, while his uncle was killed by a mob for stealing. His youngest brother was murdered while another died of AIDS. His surviving sister and her husband are alcoholics and five of their seven children are known thieves. One of them, Stephen and Komakech's cousin, was extra-judicially executed by vigilantes in 2013. Of Komakech and Stephen's two surviving siblings/half-siblings, one is a thief and drug addict and the husband of the other is in prison. Stephen is only too well aware of the dangers of stealing: he has seen people killed by mobs and known others who died that way, including his close relatives; his uncle – the one who was meant to be providing better care – caught him stealing a chicken, locked him in a hut for five days with no food and beat him daily.

Jennifer and Stephen are decent, gentle, rather charming people who are somehow surviving in the midst of this violence and disaster. It is true that Stephen's expectations of life are low; he steals to eat when

he is hungry and angry, in a spirit of adolescent rage. At other times he has a strong sense of integrity and responsibility and, in Komakech's absence, took his role as man of the house seriously. Jennifer is trying with great dignity to bring up her three young children – including the new baby – and Stephen, who she clearly cares about deeply.

Resilience as a theory

There have been a run of lynchings in our neighbourhood recently, and we have been trying to understand these more. At one level it is simple: the justice system is so corrupt that it offers zero protection to communities; there are very high levels of theft; people are angry and take matters into their own hands, with more or less overt encouragement by the police and some local politicians. There seems to be a change though in the escalation of mob justice and community frustration, whereas four or five years ago communities were instead trying to develop informal justice and security structures – a very different thing (see [Rebecca Tapscott's](#) work).

We are working on a research grant called [Deconstructing Notions of Resilience](#). We do not question that resilience is a useful descriptive concept. However, some of the ways it is now used analytically in academe and policy are problematically circular, reductive and normative. We think this is illustrated by Jennifer and Stephen's story. Collectively their family appears to be the opposite of whatever resilient might mean, though in ways so complex it defies useful analysis.

If you focus in on them, are Jennifer and Stephen *resilient* because they are still alive in the face of so much tragedy and dysfunction? Perhaps yes, as a contextual description, but not in any sense of particular psychological attributes. Stephen's way of life is staggeringly dangerous, yet we challenge anyone to show that this represents some

sort of psychological weakness. He is a teenager, unsurprisingly troubled and liable to acting out his frustrations given his desperately challenging life experiences.

If one pulls back the focus onto the community we live in, an unexceptional suburb on the northern fringes of Gulu, a city of about 150,000 people in northern Uganda, one might argue that killing thieves is a logical and effective resilience strategy in development terms – in fact this is the focus of our research. For very poor people, losing your household goods to theft is potentially life-threatening. It is nearly impossible to protect a grass-thatched mud-brick hut from thieves. If you spend a night in the health centre when your child has malaria, you might come back to find all your possessions gone. If you are already living a marginal existence, the loss of your cooking utensils, the food in the house, your blankets and mosquito net, maybe even your clothes, leaves you vulnerable to the point that you are more likely to die.

What might change the equation around mob justice and the killing of thieves is some approximation of rule of law, and ideally also some form of economic social protection, but this is the kind of political analysis that development actors' resilience theorising seems designed to dodge. We worry that too often 'resilience' functions as a reference to what the Victorians called the 'deserving poor' – those whose poverty did not challenge the self-justifying narratives of the rich or, in today's terms, neoliberal hegemony. We would argue that better development models, even if more complicated, expensive and politically challenging, look for ways to keep people like Stephen alive.

*We have changed the names and some details to protect the identities of those concerned.

*This post results from the research project **Deconstructing Notions of Resilience** at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa at LSE.*

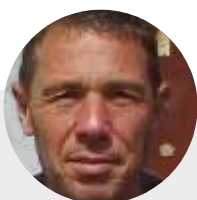
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About the author



Joseph Okello

Joseph Okello initially grew up in Alero IDP camp and in 2004 his family moved to Gulu town, where he completed his secondary schooling and trained as a peer mentor. In 2013–15 he worked as a mentor with Gulu Disable Person's Union where he campaigned for the rights of children with disabilities. Joseph has worked with LSE since 2018 as a researcher, currently working on a project on mob justice for the grant Deconstructing Notions of Resilience.



Julian Hopwood

Julian is a researcher at LSE's Centre for Public Authority and International Development and currently pursuing a PhD at Ghent University. Julian has been based in Northern Uganda since 2006, where he has worked as well as in the neighbouring regions of Karamoja and West Nile on post-conflict humanitarian and development programmes and policy.

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